AN APPROPRIATE PATRIOTISM
Mark 12:13-17
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The conflict has been there from the beginning. The earliest Christian Creed was the brief statement "Jesus Christ is Lord". The power of the statement was initially political as well as theological. What it meant was, "The Emperor is not Lord, Jesus Christ is." The Christian affirmation, therefore, deprived Rome of that absolutely essential keystone upon which all totalitarianism rests; namely, the supremacy of the Emperor, King, Fuhrer, Party or State. "Jesus Christ is Lord" was not theological abstraction, but, more often than not, political agitation. People who said it were not rebuffed for having bad taste or scolded for bad theology, they were thrown into jail as enemies of the state, traitors. The Romans never could understand it. They were not indiscriminate butchers. Pax Romano was built on strength and law, not terror. Their exercise of political authority did not include persecution of other religions. In fact, they were rather proud of their tolerance. What infuriated them about Christians, and before them, the Jews, was this simple denial of the Emperor's supremacy. When the Legions carried the Eagle through the streets, Roman subjects were required to bow. The Eagle represented the Emperor himself and the sovereignty of the State. Christians simply refused to do it. "Jesus Christ is Lord," they said. 6.2 alone -

The conflict has been there from the beginning. The occasions of its emergence within the human story contain both the best and worst of humanity. Thomas a Becket, for instance, 12th century Archbishop of Canterbury, whose struggles between conscience and political expediency, between loyalty to his King and his Church, led to his "murder in the Cathedral" in 1170 A.D. Sir Thomas More, for instance, 16th century English statesman, whose loyalty to Christ and church was tested by loyalty to Crown and cost him his head. Thomas More, you will recall, simply could not bring himself to endorse Henry VIII's propensity for marriage, annulment and remarriage. He did not even speak against the King. But while others were falling all over themselves to rationalize and applaud Henry's antics, More remained thunderously silent. He loved England, the Crown, his King. He loved Jesus Christ more.

And, of course, those remarkable young radicals, who gathered in Philadelphia in 1776, to decide about the future of the Crown's colonies in the new world... the conflict was there for many of them. They were British subjects - many of them born and reared in Great Britain. Before they became American patriots, founders of a new Republic, they had to decide to commit treason against their country. They had to struggle with every conviction they ever had about their country and conclude finally that there was something worth more than that commitment. We forget that, I fear. We forget that the men who signed the Declaration of Independence did, in that act, commit treason.

Clergy are particularly interested in the fact that one of the signers was a minister, John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. When a document entitled "A Declaration of Independence" was submitted by Mr. Jefferson, the Rev. Dr. Witherspoon rose to speak. He said, "That noble instrument upon your table, which insures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning by every pen in the house...although these grey hairs must soon descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country." (A Report on the United States Bicentennial, the 187th General Assembly of the UPCUSA).

It is an old and complex issue. Its antiquity - and complexity - are apparent in the text..."pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God."

The Pharisees, apparently, had scheduled a meeting to devise a foolproof plan to trap Jesus of Nazareth. What better way to discredit Him and perhaps get Him arrested in the bargain than to trip Him up in His own rhetoric on a topic of controversy. It was no accident, therefore, that the subject was the conflict between religious and political loyalties.

"Is it against the law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor?" The levy in question was a head tax which went directly into the Emperor's treasury. It was not a heavy tax but it was very much a symbol of the fact that Judah was under the heel of Rome, in much the same way that the Stamp Act became synonymous with infant taxation, oppression and therefore a revolutionary symbol prior to 1776. The Zealots, a revolutionary political organization, held that the Jews could not pay the tax and advised civil disobedience - non-payment. Many secretly supported them. One New Testament scholar writes that the real question is this: "Can a Jew conscientiously pay the imperial tax in the Holy Land, or must he fight for independence on the ground that God alone is King of Israel?"(Sherman E Johnson, The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 7, p. 518).

The Pharisees reasoned that no matter how Jesus answered the question, therefore, He would be in trouble, If He said, "It is illegal, do not pay the tax," He would have been seized immediately by the Romans for sedition. On the other hand, if He said that the tax was legal, many would have discredited Him as a Roman sympathizer or collaborator. Either way, the Pharisees would accomplish their goal.

They did not count on Jesus understanding the ploy, which I think He did. They had even tried to flatter Him into over-stepping the boundaries..."Teacher, we know that You tell the truth without worrying about what people think," they had said. Instead of taking the bait, however, Jesus asked to see a coin. One was produced with the head of Caesar inscribed, a silver denari, the very coin required to pay the tax. It was Caesar's money: the coin of the realm was the property of the Emperor. "Give it to him," Jesus said, "It's his anyway." "But pay to God what belongs to God."

The very worst possible interpretation of that text is that Jesus drew a clear line between the sacred and the profane, between Church and State, religion and politics. It seems at first that He was teaching the doctrine of two realms, so popular in western theology..."City of God, City of Man". That, however, would have been totally foreign to Him. Instead, in the highest prophetic tradition of Old Testament Judaism, Jesus was ascribing to Israel's oldest Creed; namely, that God is the only true King of Israel. The sense of the action in this incident is dripping with sarcasm. Caesar is thrown a mere crumb. "Here - look at his picture - give him what he owns - about 25¢ worth. But the Lord God, the Sovereign and only King of Creation, owns everything. You owe everything you have...everything you are to Him."

The Pharisees were amazed and well they might be. Their foolproof trap was smashed. Their trick question had been turned into an opportunity for an answer they didn't want; namely, that God is Lord of all. Lord of individuals. Lord of religious institutions, Lord of Emperors and Empires.

Is there inappropriate p... your last

Sometimes we are inclined to forget that. In fact, sometimes patriotism, noble love of one's country, gives to nation the sovereignty that belongs to God alone. Sometimes the God/Caesar issue is very contemporary. Patriotism, as is the case with all powerful emotion, has a dark side as well as its more admirable effects. The psychologists tell us that love is not terribly far from hate. Self-esteem, we all know, is not terribly distant from self-centeredness. And patriotism is always just several steps from bigotry and intolerance. What is transpiring in Northern Ireland, in both the bigoted pageantry of the Protestant Orange Orders and the misguided romanticism of the IRA is patriotism gone awry. Adherents of both causes would maintain strenuously that their violent behavior is simply intense love of country. Ian Paisley would defend his neo-fascism as unbending loyalty to Crown. And IRA hit squads and hunger strikers respond with their violence - for the sake of Irish integrity.

Patriotism can be a version of "mine is better than yours" played on a grand scale, ordinarily modestly as when one pulls for ~~Marcuse~~ instead of ~~Borg~~. It took Nazi Germany in our own era with its intensely nationalistic symbols and fiercely patriotic celebrations to teach us the raw danger of patriotism gone crazy.

Somehow, patriotism on its way to becoming bigotry always seems stop and team up with religion. Every tyrant has understood the potential of that tragic combination. Some of the saddest chapters in human history are the result. In the name of religious and political orthodoxy, the Bay Puritans banished dissenters and hanged Quakers. Nathaniel Ward proclaimed, "All Antinomians, Archbaptists and other enthusiasts shall have free liberty to keep away from us...the sooner the better." Several centuries later Evangelist Billy Sunday said of some immigrants, "If they don't like it here, let 'em go back to the land where they were kenneled." (The Lively Experiment, Sydney Meade, p.14).

"America,Love it or Leave It" the bumper sticker advises, too frequently adjacent to another sticker announcing the imminent end of the age and return of the Lord. Somehow, those who would be a "Moral Majority" never learned that what is unique and great about this country is that the morality of the majority here does not exclude or coerce or push around the minority.

Somehow the so-called Moral Majority never quite understands the conflict between the gracious, accepting love of God it espouses, and the heavy-handed effort to force its standards, aesthetics, literary and television preferences and theology on everybody else.

What this experiment is all about is that people are free here to disagree with their government and the majority of their citizens, free even not to like it. True patriotism, it seems to me, is a knowing how unique that liberty is, appreciating it, defending and celebrating it, particularly at a time when the government itself seems to be saying to other nations that we don't care as much about that as we used to, that we are willing to overlook the abridgment of the human rights upon which our Republic was founded, if it is expedient to do so. An appropriate patriotism is never uncritical. If it is, I would submit, it has ceased being patriotism and has become nothing more significant than corporate egotism. Patriotism loves country enough to be critical, to expect it to be more, to demand that the nation be good and just and compassionate.

True and appropriate patriotism loves the nation at its essence; that special core philosophy of liberty; that place where we step away from others and

affirm that what is really important here, what we will defend and celebrate is the authority of the individual and the personal liberty that adheres to it. That's theological. That means that at its highest and best the nation itself protects the place where the individual relates to God, the conscience, the soul. That's the essence of the American Experiment. What totalitarianism of Right or Left needs and demands for its own is here allowed to be free.

The roots of that unique and self-limiting patriotism are in the Old Testament doctrine of God as the only Sovereign. They are also in the story ot the man who perplexed His tormentors one day simply by suggesting that they pay the Emporer his due and return to God what He was due as well.

Having recently returned from a brief but intense visit overseas, I know again how much there is to love about this country. I know, perhaps a little more clearly than before how a warped and bigoted patriotism can become intolerance and then, before your very eyes, murderous violence. I know, too, that above all which is worth loving and celebrating here, is the fragile phenomenon of personal liberty.

On the plane home I bumped into a timely essay by an American theologian. It made me glad for what I had seen, glad for coming home, glad for what I could celebrate on July 4. Joseph Sittler, University of Chicago, retired, wrote it:

"Before the word AMERICA can set one thinking or planning or resolving or defending, it ought to set one dreaming and remembering. And out of this dreamed procession of America as a concrete place will be poured the ingot of a tough and true patriotism. Have you never gone inwardly wandering among the myriad impacts of this magnificent land? - the sprawling, opulent South of the stark red earth and the blithe and lazy skies; the tragic, lonely beauty of New England, its neat white houses and stone fences, so proper to its prim certainty;the sweep of the Middle West with its little towns set astride ten thousand Main Streets that become white concrete ribbons stretching across a countryside of incredible fertility and scope; the terrifying distances of the western states where farmers' families of a Saturday night will 'run into town' - eighty miles - with ease; and the fabulous West Coast, majestic at the top where Rainier sparkles, rich and worldly-wise at the center where the land enfolds in long arms the lovely bay, and the fantastic glitter and brashness at the bottom where sprawls and brawls the City of the Angels.

"Our American lives are impoverished if they lack a sense of identity with the country around them and are ignorant of its written and anecdotal history...

"Loving, personal identification with one's own land has never been a breeder of arrogant nationalism. Indeed, a person's love for his or her own land can be the basis of respect for other people's love of their land. Just as only those who have convictions know the meaning of tolerance, so none can assess at right value the land-loves of other people except those who know and deeply love their own." (Grace Notes,p.101).

That, it seems to me, is appropriate patriotism: a love that creates tolerance, understanding, openness to others; a love tough enough to be demanding, self-critical, full of hope, therefore, for the future; a love that directs us inevitably to the Lord and Sovereign King of all.

Amen.